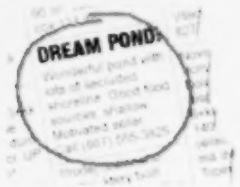

Shallow ponds are prime duck real estate

Column 408
by Claire Eamer

Home, sweet home to a duck is a nice bit of shallow water full of vegetation and tiny animals, and surrounded by deep grass and brush for nesting and hiding.

As ducks judge these things, the shallow ponds that make up the wetland complex surrounding Kloo Lake and the Jarvis River in the southwest Yukon are duck heaven.

Amy Leach, a Ducks Unlimited biologist based in Whitehorse, counted 20 species of waterbirds at the Kloo-Jarvis complex last June -- not just ducks but other waterbirds like geese, swans, loons, and grebes. Of the 10 Yukon sites where Ducks Unlimited conducted breeding pair surveys in 2004, Kloo-Jarvis topped the list in species diversity.

Canvasbacks are among the ducks using the Kloo-Jarvis wetland complex.
(photo: Ducks Unlimited)

The surveys were conducted at the request of the Champagne & Aishihik First Nation and the Alsek Renewable Resource Council and with the assistance of the Community Steward for the area, Brad Wilson, and the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Kloo-Jarvis had already been identified in the Aishihik Integrated Fish and Wildlife Plan as an important calving area for moose. The First Nation and the resource council suspected it might also be important for waterbirds.

And so it is, says Leach. Although the wetlands don't cover a large area compared to many other Yukon wetlands, they provide just the sort of conditions waterbirds prefer for breeding.

Leach and her colleagues surveyed 79 ponds in the Kloo-Jarvis complex. The large number of ponds means there's plenty of shoreline where the birds can build their nests and hide from predators.

The ponds are shallow, which also suits most waterbirds. Shallow ponds warm in the sun, Leach explains, providing good growing conditions for vegetation and plenty of

food for insects and other small aquatic creatures. Some ponds support schools of tiny fish. All those things are food for one kind of waterbird or another.

"Usually the types of ponds that people would never want to go swimming in are where you find lots of ducks," she says.

Pond depth is particularly important for dabbling ducks like mallards and pintails, Leach adds. They feed from the water surface by tipping forward and stretching down into the water.

"They can only feed as deep as their necks will reach, so you find more dabblers on shallow ponds."

The surveys were conducted by helicopter. Leach explains that the helicopter flies low and slow, and is usually gone before the birds have a chance to panic and take flight.

Two observers do the counting, with one looking out each side of the helicopter and recording every bird on that side. With the helicopter chugging along at 30 to 40 kilometres an hour just 10 to 20 metres above the water, it's fairly easy to identify species, says Leach.

"You're right over top of the bird and you can see all the colours and markings. There's nothing to obstruct your view."

The helicopter follows the shoreline all the way around the pond. A computer linked to a digital mapping system traces the route so that the survey team can tell when they've made a complete circuit.

In the 2004 survey, Leach says, it took three hours to survey the 79 ponds in the complex. The observers recorded 523 breeding pairs from 20 different species.

The most numerous breeding birds at Kloo-Jarvis were scaup, mallards, and American widgeon -- all common breeders in the southern Yukon. Among the less common species for the area were ruddy ducks, at the northern edge of their range, and two species of diving ducks -- redheads and canvasbacks.

"My favourite species is the canvasback," says Leach. "They're just such an elegant bird."

However, the purpose of the waterbird breeding surveys is not just to admire the birds but to get a sense of the status of waterbirds and of the habitat that is important to them.

In many parts of Canada, vital habitat has already disappeared. Leach's work in the Yukon is aimed at ensuring that the important wetlands of the boreal forest don't suffer the same fate.

For more information about Ducks Unlimited and its work in the boreal forest, go to www.ducks.ca or contact Amy Leach at (867) 668-3824. For information about a number of waterbird species, check out the fact sheets at Hinterland Who's Who --

www.hww.ca.

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